



Sojourner Truth

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That little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him.

— Ain't I A Woman? speech, 1851 Women's Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio

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Quick Facts

- * 1797-1893
- * African-American public speaker, activist, and feminist
- * Delivered the speech "Ain't I A Woman?" in 1851

Biography

Sojourner Truth has been adopted as a powerful symbol for both feminists and African-Americans through the years. The early 1900s represented Truth primarily as a feminist, but by the 1910s and onwards, she was heralded as a symbol for equal rights for African Americans. By the 1940s Truth was counted among the most influential African-Americans, and her popularity continued through the 1960s and 70s. Contemporary critics have lauded Truth's speaking abilities, placing her among some of the most polished religious and civic speakers of her time. In 1981, Truth was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. By the 1990s, biographies reflected her as both a symbol of black America and the feminist movement, as well as an important figure in the political history of America.

Isabella Baumfree was born into slavery in 1797 in Ulster County, New York. She was one of thirteen children. She never learned to read or write, but would become an excellent public speaker. She was sold at the age of 11. She had been a slave for five masters.

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Biography continued

Her third master, John Dumont, forced her to marry another slave by the name of Thomas. They had five children, most of whom were sold into slavery. As soon as Isabella could, she ran away to New York City. She was taken in by the Van Wagener family. The Van Wageners helped her get back her son Peter, who was sold into slavery. She changed her last name to Van Wagener when she moved in with them. In 1828, the New York State Anti-Slavery Act freed her. Isabella often had visions and heard voices from God directing her to go forth and preach. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth to reflect her mission to be a traveler who showed people their sins and told them what was true. Truth soon began to work with organizations that were designed to aid women.

She was deeply religious in her personal life and described herself as having a “perfect trust” in God and prayer. After fifteen years of working in New York as a housekeeper, she moved to Long Island and Connecticut as a traveling Pentecostal preacher. She had a commanding presence of five feet eleven inches and stories with dignity to match. At one event where she spoke, people in the audience questioned whether she was really a woman, or a man in disguise. To prove herself to them, she unbuttoned her blouse and showed her breasts to the crowd. A big turning point in her life occurred when she went to Northampton, Massachusetts and joined the utopian community. It was there she met other abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Olive Gilbert. While in this association, Truth discussed the current situations of women’s oppression and slaves’ oppression. She was the first one in the country to link the two issues together.

Truth spoke at many different functions about many different topics. One of her most famous speeches was the “Ain’t I A Woman” speech she gave in 1851 at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. This speech was one of the most interesting and most remembered speeches of the convention. Many different versions of this speech exist today, depending on the person who recorded or rewrote it.

In October of 1856, Sojourner Truth went to Michigan to address the Friends of Human Progress Association. It was there that she spoke about the injustice of slavery and its impact on families. She told the audience about her five children that she loved but lost to slavery. However, Truth believed in God and also believed that all the rights and love that were taken away from slaves in this life would be returned to them in heaven.



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On June 12, 1863, an unidentified newspaper ran a version of one of Truth's speeches from a meeting at the State Sabbath School Convention in Battle Creek, Michigan. Here Truth spoke to the people about race relations and how God made everyone who they are, so it was not fair to degrade others based on their race because it was God who had made them that way. "Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Saviour die to save the one as well as the other? If so, white children must know that if they go to Heaven, they must go there without their prejudice against color, for in Heaven black and white are one in the love of Jesus."

In an October 29, 1864 letter dictated by Sojourner Truth to a friend, Rowland Johnson, Truth speaks of her meeting with President Abraham Lincoln. Truth told God that she believed Lincoln was a good man, and if he were spared and not "thrown into the lion's den and the lions did not tear him up," then she would know that God had saved him for her to meet. Therefore, in his four years, she at some point had to meet him. They spoke about the end of slavery and how grateful she was to him for signing the treaty. In her letter, Truth said, "I must say, I am proud to say, that I never was treated by anyone with more kindness and cordiality than were shown to me by that great and good man, Abraham Lincoln, by the grace of God, president of the United States for four years more."

In June 1881, the state legislature of Michigan was considering a measure to institute capital punishment in the state. Truth addressed the members of the legislature, and a reporter's version was printed in the *Battle Creek Nightly Noon* Newspaper on June 8, 1881. She spoke about God being against capital punishment, and how He commands us to love one another. She closed by saying "Remember, the things I say to you in this capitol tonight will never die. He who sanctions the crime of hanging will have to answer for it. I believe that God has spared me to do good to this white population, which has done so much good to the black race. How wonderful God turns things." The Wyckoff hanging bill was rejected.

Despite the fact that she could not read or write, Truth gave powerful speeches pertaining to women and slaves. Fortunately, many of her speeches were recorded and published. She also spoke before Congress and two presidents. Sojourner Truth's religious experiences carried over into her *Narrative*, which was a striking spiritual work which focuses mainly on the evolution of her faith and religious experiences. Additionally, because it ends not with an indictment of slave owners but a prayer of forgiveness for their mistakes, it has always remained outside the canon of ex-slave narratives (Byington).



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Biography continued

Truth is known for her humor and biblical references in her speeches. She spoke on controversial topics with rarely a prepared speech. Topics ranged from abolition to women's rights and temperance. Truth's speeches were often a voice of the Black population in the history of feminism. "The very fact that Truth's message has remained pertinent for so long inspires investigation into her place in feminist abolitionism. The function of her public persona in the history of American reform" (Byington). She did not believe in traditional roles of women in society; she established herself without a husband and lived her life telling her inspiring and controversial views with great passion. She continued her speeches and preaching until she became ill. She died with her loved ones around her in Battle Creek, Michigan.

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